

01-02-09: Hazard Mitigation

Rhode Island, a coastal state, is vulnerable to flooding, high winds, ice storms, and coastal erosion. These are known as *natural hazards*. Under extreme conditions, they can become natural *disasters* with severe impacts.

Natural disasters are costly. For example, in 1938 the City of Providence suffered \$16.3 million in damages due to hurricanes. In 1954, that figure was \$25.1 million. Considering the recent and planned redevelopment of downtown Providence, the cost of flooding and wind damage could be much higher today. Throughout Rhode Island, more than \$83 billion worth of residential and commercial coastal property would be at risk if a repeat of these two hurricanes, or some other natural disaster, were to occur. ((63))

According to the Institute for Business and Home Safety (IBHS), an insurance industry advocacy group, when businesses are forced to close as a result of a natural disaster more than 43 percent never re-open and another 29 percent close within two years. ((64)) Small businesses are more vulnerable to disasters than large businesses. These are sobering statistics, as more than 97 percent of Rhode Island's businesses have 500 or fewer employees. ((65))

Proper planning for natural disasters can help reduce the loss of jobs and taxes caused by business closings as well as limiting their environmental impacts. Recognizing this, in 1998 Governor Almond signed an Executive Order designating Rhode Island as the first "Showcase State for Natural Disaster Resistance and Resilience" in the country. ((66))

The goal of the Showcase State program is to reduce losses due to natural disasters by careful planning and decision making that in effect create a disaster-ready and disaster-resilient statewide economy. This involves identifying areas prone to natural and other hazards in the community (such as floodplains and areas of coastal erosion), assessing economic vulnerability (in terms of businesses and impacted populations) in the event of a storm or other event, business recovery planning, and fine-tuning once a disaster strikes and is handled.

The Showcase State program is a mitigation strategy. The U.S. Economic Development Administration defines mitigation as "sustained action that reduces or eliminates long-term risk to people and property from natural hazards and their effects." It is an ongoing effort by government, business and industry, associations, and individuals to lessen the impact of natural disasters on families, homes, businesses, and the community. ((67))

The Showcase State program is being implemented on several fronts, community by community and statewide. Working with the University of Rhode Island, Sea Grant, and the R.I. Emergency Management Agency (RIEMA), several municipalities — including Charlestown, Narragansett, Providence, and Pawtucket —

have identified risks in their respective communities and written strategies for their reduction. A statewide Showcase State Coordinating Committee has been in place since 1998, offering the opportunity for Statewide Planning to work with RIEMA and the IBHS to incorporate the principles of hazard mitigation into the State Guide Plan. A statewide hazard mitigation plan is under development by RIEMA while appropriate policies within the various elements of the State Guide Plan are being drafted.

In the *Economic Development Policies and Plan*, mitigation language has been written into Policies B-2, B-5, B-8, B-9, and B-17 under “Objective B, Facilities.”